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RUEHOK/AMCONSUL OSAKA KOBE IMMEDIATE 6388
RUEHKSO/AMCONSUL SAPPORO IMMEDIATE 3150
RUCPDOC/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TOKYO 000421

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SUBJECT: ROK EMBASSY APPLAUDS ASO; FEARS FOR U.S.-JAPAN
RELATIONS UNDER DPJ

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Classified By: Charge James P. Zumwalt, reasons 1.4(b),(d).

¶1. (C) Summary: PM Aso has worked hard to improve relations with Korea, and his efforts are widely appreciated in Seoul, ROK Embassy Minister Kim told the Charge in a meeting on February 24. Aso and ROK President Lee have worked well together to defuse potentially explosive historical issues and are focused on a future-oriented partnership. Examples of Aso's action-oriented approach are his direct intercession in arrangements for the annual celebration of "Takeshima Day" in Shimane Prefecture and his hosting of the first Japan-ROK-China Summit in November 2008. He has been less successful in pushing through with a bilateral FTA.

¶2. (C) Summary (cont'd): Kim told the Charge that he and other ROK Embassy officials have expressed concern to opposition DPJ lawmakers over the anti-U.S. rhetoric coming from party leaders. Their DPJ contacts have assured them that there is no reason for concern. Kim indicated that his government has no particular concerns over the future of Japan-ROK ties under a DPJ-led administration, but is definitely worried about a negative impact on Japan's alliance relationship with the U.S. The Charge told Kim Secretary Clinton had met with Ozawa and the DPJ leadership during her Tokyo visit and received assurances the DPJ regards the U.S.-Japan Alliance as key to Japan's security. Kim said little about current Korean thinking on the DPRK, but noted that Seoul was very pleased with Secretary Clinton's remarks during her recent visit. End Summary.

Japan-ROK Relations "Better Under Aso"

¶3. (C) Prime Minister Taro Aso has worked hard to improve ties with South Korea, and appears genuinely committed to managing this important bilateral relationship, ROK Embassy Minister Kim Young-sun told the Charge on February 24. Aso has a real interest in Korea, Kim noted, due, at least in part, to his upbringing in Kyushu. More importantly, he and ROK President Lee Myung-bak share similar views about the importance of the relationship, and have established good personal relations. Both, he noted, are "pragmatic business types." ROK-Japan relations were at a low point just before Aso came into office, Kim recounted, when Japan approved use of the geographic designation "Takeshima" in high school textbooks back in summer 2008. Since then, both governments have worked hard to repair and improve relations, he stated,

and the direction is being set at the top.

¶ 14. (C) Aso has also impressed Kim and other Korean officials by taking concrete actions to strengthen the relationship. He cited Aso's leadership in helping to neutralize the impact of last week's "Takeshima Day" celebrations in Shimane Prefecture as a good example. In the days leading up to the event, Aso restricted the participation of certain ranking Diet members. His action helped to tamp down public sentiment and allowed Korean officials to avoid making public comments. The coordination between the two governments worked because both sides agreed that it was "not worth making a big deal over." As another example, Kim noted that just one day before his lunch with the Charge, he had participated in a larger meeting with Aso to discuss the progress of a future-oriented Japan-ROK study group organized with the assistance of Keio Professor Masao Okonogi. Aso's hosting of the first Japan-ROK-China Summit in Fukuoka in November 2008 was another good example of his willingness to value action over mere words.

Historical Issues, Trade Remain Problematic

¶ 15. (C) The year 2010 will mark the 100th anniversary of Japan's annexation of Korea, Kim noted, and the diplomatic skills of the two leaders will be put to the test in managing this extremely sensitive commemoration. Stalled talks over a Japan-ROK Free Trade Agreement also require additional attention, he stated. Describing the current status of talks as "consultations" rather than true "negotiations," Kim blamed Japan's lack of a central authority to force the various ministries to synchronize their efforts, lamenting that "they are eager to move on the portions that will give

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them some benefit, but not on issues such as agriculture or fisheries.

U.S.-Japan Relations Could Deteriorate Under DPJ

¶ 16. (C) Korea is worried about the prospects for U.S.-Japan relations under a government led by the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), which is widely expected to take power in the next Lower House election, Kim said. In meetings with DPJ Diet members, his Embassy officers have expressed concern over statements that criticize the United States, or question the alliance, particularly on issues such as the Status of Forces Agreement and Host Nation Support. The response of the Korean Embassy's DPJ contacts echoes what U.S. Embassy officers have heard: "Don't worry about Ozawa. This is just campaign rhetoric." Kim noted that his Embassy has been steadily increasing contacts with the DPJ, although not directly with Ozawa. He indicated no particular concerns over the future of Japan-ROK ties under a DPJ-led administration. The Charge told Kim Secretary Clinton had met with Ozawa and the DPJ leadership during her Tokyo visit and received assurances the DPJ regards the U.S.-Japan Alliance as key to Japan's security.

No Information on DPRK, but Positive on Clinton

¶ 17. (C) Kim expressed interest in U.S. thinking on DPRK leader Kim Chong-il and succession issues. He was very cagey about providing his own views, other than to note that Seoul was very pleased with the recent visit of Secretary Clinton, and appreciated her strong rhetoric.

Bio Notes

¶ 18. (C) Kim told the Charge that he would be leaving Tokyo in March for Seoul. He said his new job has yet to be announced, although separately we have heard he will serve as

MOFAT spokesman. Kim speaks relatively good English, having served in Washington, but even better Japanese. He described his replacement, Lee Hyuck, as a seasoned MOFAT Asia hand, with two prior tours in Tokyo and at least one in Beijing. Mr. Lee also studied at Keio University, where he was a student of Professor Okonogi.

ZUMWALT